



PROCESSED
NOV 28 2017
U LIBRARY

Is it time for another Reformation?

† The INQUIRER £1
www.inquirer.org.uk

The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest
Nonconformist religious newspaper

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

*From the Object passed at the
General Assembly of the Unitarian and
Free Christian Churches, 2001*

The Inquirer is published fortnightly
by The Inquirer Publishing Company
(2004), Registered Charity
1101039.

Editor M Colleen Burns MA

46A Newmarket Road

Cringleford

Norwich NR4 6UF

ph: 01603 505281

e: inquirer@btinternet.com

Copyeditor Sarah Reynolds

Cover Martin Luther painted by Lucas Cranach the Elder via Wikimedia Commons

Articles express the views of their authors. Submissions are welcome and may be edited for content and length. They should be emailed or typed and should be the author's original work or be attributed appropriately.

Subscribe Annual subscriptions are £35 with discounts for bulk orders. For information, contact the Editor.

Advertise for £6 per column cm, on 3-col page, plus VAT or £7.50 per col cm, on a 2-col page. A one-page supplement is £200. One column on a 2-col page is £100, on a 3-col page, £75. A5 fliers may be inserted for £95 plus VAT.

Contact the editor for details.

Births, marriages and deaths are 50p a word plus VAT.

Find out more about Unitarians

www.unitarian.org.uk

or email info@unitarian.org.uk

The General Assembly, Essex Hall

1-6 Essex Street

London WC2R 3HY

ph: 0207 2402384



Inquiring Words

SPIRIT LEAD US

Spirit lead us to where compassion knows no
borders,

Inspire us to see the connectivity of all Life,
Imbue us with the principles of Justice, Equality and
Liberty.

Guide our daily actions to shape a better world for
all,

Widen our vision to see hope beyond human
conflicts,

Open us to all the possibilities for positive change,
Send us as peacemakers into this world,
Spirit lead us, though many and diverse, to be One
with You.

— John Pickering

It's time to reform the Reformation

Clay Nelson asks: Would Unitarians be found guilty of innovation in our search for truth and meaning? The answer may depend on whether you believe, like Francis Dávid, that the reformation is incomplete.

Until 500 years ago, one church controlled all of Christianity for more than a millennium. It had become grievously corrupt, in part because it had become interwoven with the state. One particular abuse was the last straw that enraged a young monk, Martin Luther, so much that he sent a message to his bishop condemning the practice of selling indulgences to political leaders to raise money to build St Peter's Basilica in Rome. An indulgence was like a 'Get out of jail free' card. No matter how serious the sin, the rich and powerful could buy an indulgence and have the church's guarantee that they could get into heaven, without having to confess and do penance.

Luther's 95 Theses, that legend says he nailed to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, went as close to viral as something could in the 16th century – thanks to the recent invention of the printing press. And thus, the Protestant Reformation began. Western Europe was ripe for it. This was an age when the idea of nationalism was rising. Political leaders had found the church's interference and dominance tiresome. So breaking with Rome was as much a political act as a theological one.

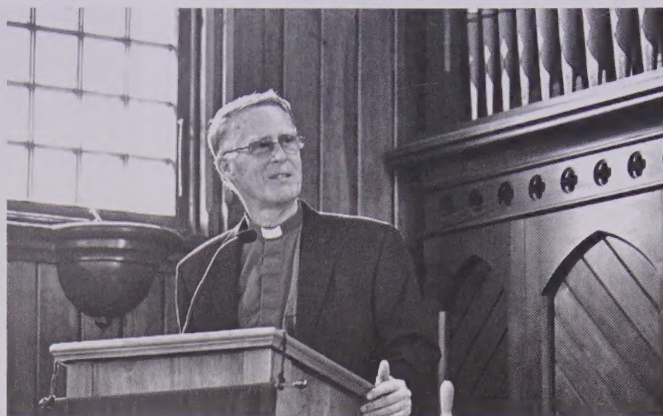
A number of others followed Luther's lead, the most notable one being John Calvin. While all shared revulsion for Rome, they were not of one mind on countless theological niceties, like what really happened when the bread and wine were blessed at communion. Unfortunately, the major figures of the Reformation – Calvin, Luther, and others – did agree on one thing. They all wanted to substitute their brand of 'purified' theocracy – that is, a church-run state – for the dominant corrupt version.

Reformers wanted theocracy

They fully intended that their new, improved Christianity would become the new, improved law of the land, legally eliminating all wrong thinking that differed from their own, more righteous ideas. The religion of the country's ruler determined which version of Christianity would be the civil law in this new age of nationalism. So, if you were Catholic and your king became a Calvinist you had to convert or face harsh retribution.

The Reformation needed reforming right from its inception. One such effort began in the Transylvanian Alps of Hungary, thanks to Francis Dávid. He is considered to be the Father of Unitarianism. Born sometime around 1510 in the city of Kolozsvár, he would die in a cold, dark castle dungeon in 1579. His crime against the state was 'innovation'. It doesn't sound like a crime deserving of draconian punishment, but here is the backstory.

Dávid had considerable intellectual gifts. His teachers recognised this and sent him to Wittenberg and Frankfurt to con-



Clay Nelson preaches at the Auckland Unitarian Church. Photo provided by Clay Nelson

tinue his studies. There he encountered the Reformation.

Upon returning to Transylvania, he engaged in debates defending Catholicism over Lutheranism. He must have been quite an orator, for most biographies list him as having won nearly every one of those religious debates.

Francis Dávid kept an open mind

These debates would gather preachers and leaders together to consider the merits of the differing positions. Dávid, while defending Catholicism, was swayed by the soundness of the Lutheran arguments. Afterwards, he became a Lutheran preacher and bishop.

As the Reformation continued, there were other debates. Dávid was called upon to defend the Lutheran position over and against the even more reform-oriented followers of John Calvin. Hundreds attended these debates. Again, Dávid won the opinion war. And again, his mind was swayed by the reforms put forth by the Calvinists, and he became a Calvinist preacher and leader.

Unitarian Universalist historian Earl Morse Wilbur noted (*A History of Unitarianism*, p. 64): 'Dávid... having an inquisitive mind, was much more inclined to pioneer in fresh fields than to rest content in those already won...'

Transylvania's young King, John Sigismund was involved in these religious debates. He realised that with these increasingly divergent religious positions, there was no possibility of compromise among the various interpreters of proper doctrine. Rather than resort to war and the violence that was sweeping across Europe with the Reformation, King John issued an edict that each person was free to support their chosen understanding of Christian doctrine.

His Edict of Toleration allowed Dávid, his court preacher, to begin to explore questions concerning the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Jesus more widely. He was drawn to unorthodox interpretations of Christian doctrine that formed the basis of the Unitarian position.

This was part of what church historians call the Radical Reformation. The Reformed clergy were up in arms. So the king scheduled another round of debate.

He invited believers in the 'Unity of God' position to debate the Trinitarians. And the debate lasted 10 days, beginning at 5am each day. A chronicler later noted:

'One heard all over Transylvania in the villages and in cities, even among the ordinary people, the great disputes during
(Continued on next page)

Dávid sets an example for us today

(Continued from previous page)

meals, during drinking, in the evening and the morning, at night and daytime, in the common talk and from the pulpits, talk of these debates, even accusations and fights between the representatives of the two religions’.

Dávid represented the Unitarian position, God was one and Jesus was human. He didn’t just argue for the sake of arguing; nor did he make things up off the top of his head. Adhering to Reformation practice, he relied on scripture to buttress his arguments. And in the end, Dávid’s arguments were deemed stronger, and many in Transylvania embraced Unitarianism.

A second debate was held the following year, and here the King declared that he himself was Unitarian and there should be religious toleration in the land – and that included this new religion. This particular debate was held in Hungarian – rather than Latin – so that everyone could understand.

Dávid converted many to Unitarianism

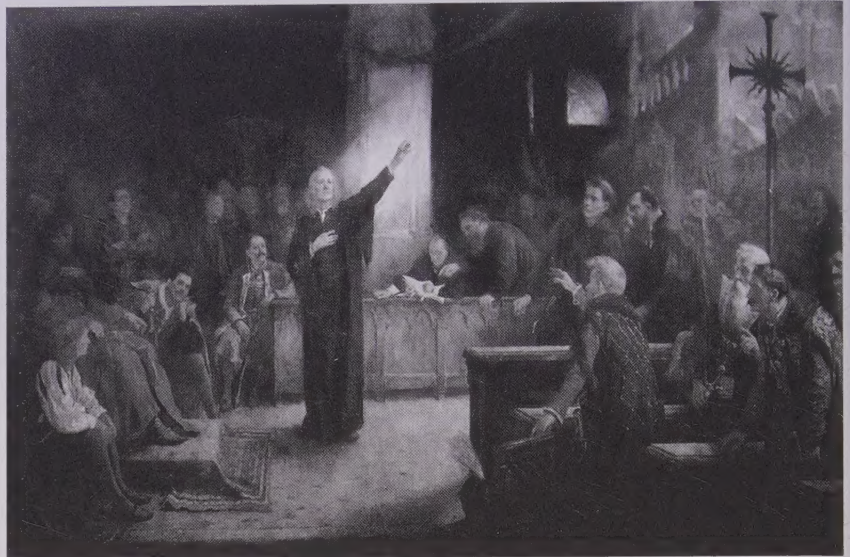
Tradition has it that just after coming home from the debate Dávid stood on the ‘round rock’ at the corner of Torda Street in Kolozsvár and preached so forcefully that all who were there were converted and became Unitarian. He was supposedly carried into the great church, Saint Michael’s, where all could hear his words.

Sadly for Unitarians, King John died young, leaving no heir to the throne. A Catholic succeeded King John, and promptly dismissed most of the Unitarians at court. While he did reaffirm a policy of toleration for those Christian religions named in the 1571 decree, he declared that he would not allow any further religious innovation. Unitarianism continued to gain more converts in Transylvania and soon an ecclesiastical organisation was developed. Dávid, now the Unitarian Bishop, was still driven toward reform of doctrine – for him, the reformation was incomplete. He questioned doctrines having to do with communion, infant baptism, predestination and the worship of Jesus. He was counselled to tone down these declarations, to keep silent, so that the newly formed church could establish itself without royal interference.

Refusing to be intimidated, Dávid preached his heretical ideas from the pulpit, and continued to do so even after the King ordered him to stop. He was the incarnation of the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Fourth Principle: *A free and responsible search for truth and meaning*. He was arrested and tried for the crime of ‘innovation’. Found guilty, he was condemned to prison for the remainder of his life.

So, my question for us today is, would we be found guilty of innovation in our search for truth and meaning? The answer may depend on whether you believe like Dávid that the reformation is incomplete.

A dictionary of sociology defines religious innovation as ‘any change in religious practice, organization, or belief. The major world religions have developed orthodox bodies of belief, custom, and practice, which are regarded as part of a sacred tradition. Religious innovation is thus seen as a departure from orthodoxy that threatens tradition. Since religious



Francis Dávid, centre in ‘The Diet of Torda’, a painting by Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch, via Wikimedia Commons

innovation is inevitable, there is a permanent tension between belief in the unchanging nature of orthodox tradition, and the actual social change of religious organisations.’

One would think being heretics and all, who have rejected doctrines and dogmas as our central organising principle, we would not be resistant to innovation. But that is neither our history nor our present.

For instance, Unitarians have a proud, strong tradition of having a free pulpit, which is fine as long as we agree with the message being preached. We are no different from other religious groups about our traditions, our rituals, our buildings, and our established democratic structures. We consider them sacred. I feared for my survival on my first Sunday when I wore my dog collar in a Unitarian church. It was too Christian. If I tampered with ‘Joys and Concerns’ or didn’t include singing ‘Spirit of Life’ in the service, I would do so at my peril. Just moving notices from the beginning of the service to the end was done with some trepidation.

Unitarians are still human

We may be generally progressive in our theology, and liberal in our outlook about the world around us, but we are still human. Humans tend to be risk-averse and find change daunting. We like predictability and stability. The status quo is our friend, even if we don’t like it. Our enculturation – and the privilege granted us at birth – strengthen these attitudes.

Like the privilege we were born with, we had little to do with our enculturation, the process whereby individuals learn their group’s culture, through experience, observation, and instruction.

Most enculturation is extremely useful. Socialisation has enabled us to function as adult human beings. We have learned how to listen and speak, how to read and write, how to relate with other people for our mutual benefit, and how to function successfully within our familial, social, economic, political, and technological systems.

But enculturation becomes an influence to be resisted when it dictates the essential content of our lives: the choices we make, the risks we take and the values we hold. As we become

(Continued on next page)

Buddhists are culpable in Rohingya

The way of Buddhism is saving people, helping people, giving loving kindness to all people. We should not take account of the skin colour or the particular religion of people, just give them loving-kindness. People who refuse to give loving kindness to certain sorts of people are going against the way of Buddhism.

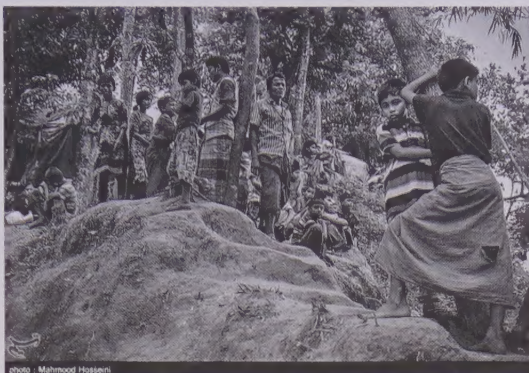
These were the words of monk Shwe Nya Wa Sayadaw as he tried to calm communal violence between Muslims and adherents of his own faith in Meiktila, Myanmar, in 2013 – it is well to think of the background to today's refugee crisis on the western border of that unsettled country.

Two years later Sayadaw was summoned to attend a government-appointed committee of high-ranking fellow monks where he was reprimanded for 'speaking out of line with Buddhist doctrine and not following the instructions of his seniors.' He was ordered to keep silent. His real offence was that he had gone on to criticise a monk-led movement known as 969, which urges the boycott of Muslim-owned businesses, describes mosques as 'enemy bases' and supports a law against inter-faith marriage.

Muslims are 4% of the population of Myanmar (former Burma) which is 80% Buddhist. Their citizenship was affirmed by the country's first Prime Minister in 1959 because they had lived in the land for several generations. However this was revoked for many Muslims, mainly those of Rohingya ethnicity, in 1982.

And since that time government, army and the monasteries have insisted that these Muslims are an alien invasion. It is hardly a surprise that what followed was a quarter century of deep mistrust and outbursts of violence.

In the winter of 2014/15 a small team of lawyers led by Professor Penny Green of Queen Mary University of London entered Rakhine Province to which the UN and – until recent-



Displaced Rohingya Muslims are fleeing oppression. Tasnim News Agency photo by Mahmood Hosseini via Wikimedia Commons

ly – Aung San Suu Kyi were denied access. Having conducted 167 interviews they came to the conclusion that Myanmar was in the penultimate stage of conducting a genocide. This should have triggered international action. But in order not to go down that road, governments and the UN refrained from using the word – preferring the term "ethnic cleansing."

The current wave of 600,000 mainly Muslim refugees fleeing from violence and seeking refuge in Bangladesh is now the subject of a DEC appeal (Disasters Emergency Committee). This will provide a much needed

sticking plaster in the form of temporary camps. Buddhism meanwhile faces a crucial test.

Can these refugees ever be enticed back to their homeland, be given adequate protection and restored as citizens? In an open letter, many teachers of Buddhism outside the country have pleaded with the leaders of Myanmar for a change of heart; they call for a return to what the Buddha taught, exemplified by the preaching of monks like Sayadaw.

- UK politicians are well briefed about this crisis and the training programme with the Myanmar army has recently been suspended.
- Donations to the DEC appeal (See: <http://bit.ly/2Ahd4Yw>) are matched by an equal donation from the UK government.
- Ethically sensitive stores Primark and H&M source from factories in Myanmar. It is worth asking their management what they are doing for the refugees.
- If you visit any of the monasteries don't expect a discussion on politics and the dhamma

Graham Murphy is a member of Ancient Chapel Liverpool, a Unitarian and a Buddhist. His sources include the International State Crimes Initiative Report (2015) and a friend who trains with a renowned nun in a Myanmar monastery.

We must be born again and again

(Continued from previous page)

freer, we will certainly use what we have learned, but we need not pursue the purposes and goals provided by culture.

On all sides social pressures surround us, trying to squeeze us into various conventional patterns of behaviour. But when we remember that others like Francis Dàvid resisted conformity, we might decide to design our own lives around our own goals rather than accepting society's ready-made roles.

The capacity to transcend enculturation develops gradually. As one Unitarian minister put it, 'We have to be born again and again and again until we die.' The better we understand the social processes that created us, the greater our capacity to take responsibility for our own lives – and become self-creating persons.

As we successfully resist conformity in small matters, we exercise and develop the spiritual 'muscle' that will empower us to break out of the expected patterns in even more important and dramatic ways.

The freedom inherent in our human spirits enables us to rise above the social circumstances that would otherwise control us entirely – if subtly. Instead of remaining normal by our culture's measure, we learn to name the internalised influences that would shape our lives if we did not exercise our freedom. And as we come to understand what is expected, we can choose which, if any, of these expectations to fulfil and which to reject and replace with purposes we freely choose. We can only truly engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning if we do so.

I would suggest building a Beloved Community that offers radical hospitality to all is a journey that is not encouraged by our culture or our individual enculturation. If we continue on this path we are exercising our spiritual muscle. Only then might we be found guilty of innovation. Only then can we continue Dàvid's work of reforming the reformation.

The Rev Clay Nelson is minister at Auckland Unitarian Church, New Zealand.

Atheist minister goes beyond belief

By Nicky Jenkins

I was very interested to attend the Progressive Christian Network's event with the Rev Greta Vosper in Leeds, especially since our own Mill Hill Unitarian Chapel was hosting it. The Rev Jo James welcomed us, stressing the openness of Unitarianism.

Gretta, the United Church of Canada Minister at West Hill Church in Toronto has been clear that she does not believe in a supernatural, interventionist divine being since 2001. In her first book *With or Without God*, published in 2008, she identified as a non-theist. In her second book *Amen* she defined herself further as a theological non-realist and by 2013 she embraced the term 'atheist', which means, literally, no belief in a theistic, supernatural being. (She is currently appealing a 2016 United Church of Canada ruling that, as an atheist, she is unfit to serve the denomination as a minister.)

Her first talk was titled 'Creating a world Beyond the Beliefs that Divide'. She believes that congregations should allow clergy to not believe in a traditional God. (She is currently appealing a decision to remove her from ministry on the basis of unsuitability.) However she maintains that her current non-belief is concomitant with the teachings in her ministry training concerning the man-made nature of the Bible and the historical reality of Jesus. She thought of God as a concept.

Make church accessible to 'Nones'

Much of her first talk was devoted to how they do church at West Hill. It's important to do away with church jargon; nothing should need to be explained. Although they look like a church, their language is very different and should not be a barrier to different understandings. West Hill members have produced guidelines on language to reflect their core values and be accessible to those with and without religious backgrounds.

She cited the statistics of decline in church membership in USA, one case where America is following us! What are the gods of the 'Nones'? (Those who reply 'none' to the census query, 'What is your religion?') Shopping, football, news – all the ways we anaesthetise ourselves.

Can churches provide what people are really looking for? This is where Greta introduced us to the idea of 'off-label benefits'. A medicine may be intended to help with one ailment but is found to have a beneficial effect on an unrelated issue like hair loss, for example. This is the off-label benefit.

The off-label benefit of church is community. People often come to church at times of crisis and to mark this, the West Hills church banner starts with a ragged edge. Strength and grounding come from belonging.

Gretta insists the aim is for people to feel they belong in the first 15 minutes or they will not stay. West Hill use symbols and simple tasks explained so that newbies feel like insiders. They



The Rev Jo James (centre) greeted the Rev Greta Vosper, left, when she spoke at a Progressive Christian Network event held at Mill Hill Chapel, Leeds. Scott Kearns is on the right. Photo by Russell Allen

are asked to make name badges for example and told where to put them for next time. Instructions are given on when to stand, etc. Many of Greta's congregation are unchurched, not escapees from other less liberal churches. People need to see themselves in the church, be acknowledged and welcomed.

The themes of services fall into one of three categories: Relationship with self, with others and with the planet. The 'sermon' is called Perspectives as it is one of many ways of looking at the subject and is plural to indicate and invite others into dialogue.

The church holds a Community Sharing Time, which has some similarities to the Candles of Joys and Concerns in many of British Unitarian churches and chapels. Greta creates a space for vulnerability. From the floor people call out places and groups so they are inscribed on people's hearts. Then people share what is going on for them in their lives. The congregation respond with 'In this our time of need may love abound' or, for happy news, 'In this abundant blessing we share the joy'.

Atheists need confession

They still find space for the sacred. Adoration, awe, wonder are all invited and transformation through beauty is acknowledged. Greta believes people need the benefits of confession but it must be followed by restitution as accountability is a vital value in community. Other churchy-sounding activities include Thanksgiving (which is basically the practice of gratitude); Supplication, where a need is expressed. Rather than expecting God to intervene, the community can provide 'situationally transcendent resources'.

Gretta's husband Scott Kearns, raised a Baptist evangelical, has written a book of atheist hymns, *Songs for Everyone* 2017 some of which might appeal to Unitarian congregations,

(Continued on next page)

Practicalities of post-Christian church

(Continued from previous page)

though I do feel we have some pretty good ones of our own. The style seemed to be quite heavily influenced by his background, producing a shorter, bouncier, feeling-heavy song with repeating chorus which wasn't particularly to my taste, but may be something to attract a younger demographic.

Many of Greta's ideas on how to do church in a post-Christian era are familiar to me and make a lot of practical sense. She has reinvented liturgy in the same way I learned to create ritual when studying celebrancy in New Zealand and her sources are many of the writers I revelled in when trying to find a way back into religion having rejected evangelical Christianity in my late teens – John Spong, Lloyd Geering, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg.

UCC congregation similar to Unitarian

Her congregation is in some ways similar to a Unitarian one with a range of different beliefs and non-beliefs. And, she believes it is the community which keeps them there – not the beliefs. Her congregation, unlike many in the United Church of Canada (UCC), is growing. The subtitles of her two books are helpful in getting a handle on where she is coming from. *With or without God* is subtitled, 'Why the way we live is more important than what we believe' and *Amen* is subtitled, 'What prayer can mean in a world beyond belief'.

Greta's second talk was titled 'Who is going to do this work going forward?' Her concern is for the world and its people in the middle of a perfect storm in the areas of planet, religion and society. Religion is suffering from 'relevance depletion'. The UCC magazine *The Observer* did a survey which showed most people didn't know about (the UCC) and didn't care. She believes the church has been too busy making itself feel good, but it means nothing to those outside it. Her call was to pour ourselves out, to fall on our swords. What were we willing to die for? We must think of the generations to come and teach them how to do community. We have too few leaders. We need to focus on leadership and less on acquisition.

She points to a way forward. Leave liberal churches and set up atheist churches. Stop following Jesus. She points to The Oasis Network, a North American group of communities, similar to the UK-based Sunday Assembly, whose governing board she serves on. (See: www.peoplearemoreimportant.org). She sees this as a self-sacrificial move to save generations

to come. It's important that there are fora for discussion and disagreement as we become more isolated by Google algorithms which only reveal to us what we agree with. The new communities' values are that people are more important than beliefs.

Make a dinner invitation

I am not at all sure I agree with Greta's mission to create God-free churches, most especially the idea that we have anything to offer to the next generations in terms of know-how and organising ability. That, I think, is undergoing radical reforms and grass roots and networking models work in an entirely different way from our institutional churches. Leave the kids to work it out for themselves!

One idea Greta shared appealed to me – and it's something most of us could do. Simply invite people you know to dinner and ask them to bring someone you don't know with a set question for everyone. Do this every month and you will soon have created a small community and have grown and learned from the conversation.

I share many of Greta's conclusions about how to do church, using clear modern language, trying to speak across the different beliefs to the core values, marking the seasons of our lives, building community by sharing, addressing our own sense of failure, searching for consolation and help and expressing gratitude for all we have. However I have a mystical streak which likes to view the world through a different lens, and which I find I can hold despite my rational disbelief in the supernatural world. I know I'm just a big contradiction, but I'm comfortable with that.

There were three other Unitarians there that day. I wonder what they thought.

For more information on Greta Vosper, see her website: www.grettavosper.ca

The Rev Nicky Jenkins is minister at St Saviourgate Unitarian Chapel, York



Subscribe to The Inquirer

Stay informed

Keep the Unitarian flame lit

www.inquirer.org.uk

Restraint of pen, tongue, fingers and thumbs

I wonder how many times I've said the wrong thing and lived to regret it? Sometimes immediately and sometimes later, as I have realised that what I have said was wrong or – worse – hurtful?

There is a wonderful phrase in recovery circles, I recently saw reference to it on the cover of a magazine at a friend's house. The phrase is, 'Restraint of tongue and pen'. It comes from the 10th step of the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The 10th step reads 'Continue to take personal inventory and when you are wrong promptly admit it.'

These days when I say or do the wrong thing I tend to admit it quickly and try to put right what is wrong. That said, sometimes it is still too late, the damage is done and some people just won't forgive my all too human frailties.

Mostly I practise restraint of pen, tongue, fingers and thumb these days, fingers and thumb refers to comments on social media. I don't always get it right though. Sometimes I fail to pause and I respond from self-centred fear. When I do there is usually a price to pay.

That said, when I am wrong I do admit and usually promptly these days. This, I have come to believe, is a sign of spiritual maturity. The spiritually immature cannot admit fault, they cannot appear weak, and they cannot lose face. We see examples of this constantly. I suspect that most of us have witnessed this in recent months from the most powerful man on the planet, who would rather bully and harass than admit that he may just well have made a human error. To some, like him, apology is a sign of weakness. Nonsense. Apology is a sign of strength and of faith in life itself.

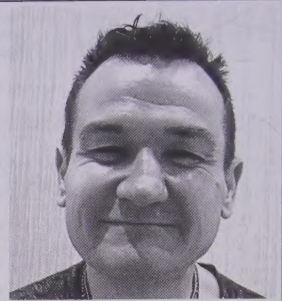
I know well the damage that such behaviour can bring, as I was brought up by such a man, a man who doubted the power of apology. These days I smile at such memories. But I do remember the pain of fearing to disagree – especially if I came across as clever or insolent.

We live in a world where we are constantly bombarded by all kinds of opinion, from many sources of media. It comes at us from all directions. Not just the radio, television and press, but many forms of social media too. We are bombarded by news outlets but also by a million and one opinions – often formed from that fear-based reptilian mind that we all possess.

Just think about how we take in and respond to the constant bombardment of news, always bad news stirring up fear and separation, from all sides. In days gone by most people would just shout at the television or radio. Nowadays, though, people respond through social media with responses that are not thought out at all. They can be quite vicious. Yes it's not just restraint of pen and tongue we need these days, we also need restraint of fingers and thumb.

This is why it is so important to pause in life, to take stock, and to sit in silence. This is not easy in a world that demands

From nothing
to everything
by
Danny Crosby



our attention and instant response, in a world that is terrified of silence. Yet silence is so vital, it is said to be golden. It is also true humility. It is OK to have nothing to say, to just bear witness to life – whatever is happening. There are at least five occasions in my immensely busy week where I humble myself in silence with other people, and many occasions when I pause and humble myself in silence when I am all alone. I pause in silence many times each day.

The problem is that so many of us are talking and not enough of us are listening. It is another sign of our modern hubris, our view that we are all-knowing and all-powerful, when the truth is that we are finite human beings, with our all too human failings. Whatever happened to true humility? What happened to the recognition of our human finiteness?

Silence frightens us. How often in life do we feel compelled to fill the space we are in with noise, even just senseless babble? I remember as a young man how much I treasured the sanctuary of silence. I would love to wander off alone in my own silent protective bubble. This faded as I entered into adulthood. By the time I was in my late 20s, I could not even sleep without the radio on. These days, silence and space is once again a dear treasure.

Before breaking silence, before filling it with noise, with our words, we really ought to check ourselves. But how do we do this? Well there is a test that has been around for a long time. It is referred to as the 'Three-fold test' for right speech. According to this test we ought to ask ourselves before speaking:

- Is it kind?
- Is it true?
- Is it necessary?

Luminaries from Sai Baba to Eleanor Roosevelt have offered variations on the same theme over the years, 'Is it kind, is it true, is it necessary?' There is also the 'Triple Filter Test', usually attributed to Socrates, which asked if it is 'true, good or useful.' The test is central to Christian and Buddhist morality.

How we communicate is so important. We may not have control over what goes on in the world around us, but how we act towards others really matters. We need to be mindful in how we speak because what we say and do – and what we do not say and do not do – has an impact on all around us.

If what we are about to say fails the three-fold test, then it is probably best to remain silent. That said, if we do speak and say the wrong thing then the mature thing to do is to apologise immediately. Apology is not a sign of weakness it is a sign of strength and spiritual maturity.

So may what we say be kind, true, and necessary. And when we are not, let us be humble enough to recognise this and make amends quickly before too much damage is done.

The Rev Danny Crosby is minister at Altrincham and Urmston.

Welsh Unitarians welcome First Minister

Aberdare Unitarians meeting at Highland Place Church in Monk Street had the opportunity of welcoming First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones to a service in October. The church was comfortably full for the occasion. Devotions were conducted by the Rev Eric Jones and Humphrey Evans, and the First Minister gave the address.

He gave some background information regarding his family who were all deeply rooted in the Nonconformist tradition. His younger days were influenced by Chapel life both at Brynaman and Bridgend and the values of his upbringing remain with him and influence his thinking – especially in regard to injustice, compassion and fair play. He married a Catholic from Northern Ireland and said some of the injustices suffered by her family also had a real influence on his life.

Carwyn Jones was introduced by Diana Bianchi, the President of the South East Wales Unitarians and a vote



Left to right: Nicky Howells A.M., Carwyn Jones, Rev Eric Jones, Diana Bianchi and Alun Watts.

of thanks was given by Alun Watts, the Vice President. Grace Jones officiated at the organ and the large congregation enjoyed singing some familiar hymns. Everyone enjoyed refreshments in the hall after the service.

On the following Thursday evening, the church's Annual Lecture was given by the Member of Parliament for Torfaen, Nick Thomas-Symonds. He spoke about Aneurin Bevan and the creation of the National Health

Service. This year is the 120th Anniversary of the birth of Aneurin Bevan. There had obviously been a good deal of research into the subject as he recalled the life and determination of Aneurin Bevan in reaching his goal, sometimes having to oppose his own Political Party in order to achieve his dream. Several questions were asked and answered eloquently by the speaker. Alun Watts chaired the meeting and a vote of thanks was given by Mark Jones.

– Eric Jones

Thoughts from Doris - feedback and invites

I was talking with a fellow attendee at a conference at the Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre and we commented on the number of changes that had been made to make the centre more comfortable and user-friendly. Therefore, when I bumped into Stella, the centre manager, I commended her and the management team. Stella refused to take any credit: 'It's all down to you, the visitors. You fill in the survey forms and we act on them.' I recalled a comment from my friend. 'Does that include the rustling duvet covers?' And it did, in one month, out the next.

Which started me thinking. If it seems too formal to hold a meeting to discuss worship, church policies, building improvements then why not produce a survey? It could be a proper survey just like the one we get at NC or it could be a slip of paper in every hymn book on which is typed: 'I should like ...' and you could explain that this could be anything – more hymns, fewer prayers, better coffee, new carpet in the vestry. You might be surprised what turns up. Some ideas will be really good and some will be like the rustling duvet covers but it might, surely, be worth a try.

That was my first thought. My second came because of the articles about interfaith contact in the 4 November issue of *The Inquirer*. You may be wondering how to establish contact with other worship communities in your town/district. Why not send them a Christmas card? If you want a non-Christian one then Unicef has a wonderful range but, as Shahida Siddique pointed out, Muslims are very happy with Mary and Jesus. I should send a Season's Greetings one to your local synagogue however. I don't think the Sikhs, the Buddhists or the Baha'i would care that much. Send cards to every one, Muslims and Methodists, Baptist and Baha'i. If you are doing something interesting over the Christmas period then you could include an invitation



to that. And then send out invitations to everyone for anything interesting happening during the year – flower festival, poetry day, shared lunch. Definitely, definitely include the Muslims for the last. When I was teaching in a mainly Muslim school we only had to whisper the words – 'school event' – and the following day we would be submerged beneath baskets and boxes and bags of utterly delicious samosas.

We should be more aware of and more in tune with the other worshipping communities as worshipping communities become smaller and smaller. I have wittered on often and often about the Whit Walks of my childhood when every Christian church (including the Unitarians, excluding the Catholics who walked separately). Just as I was leaving Bedfordshire, the local Sikh community became confident enough to hold a procession through Bedford to celebrate the birth of Guru Nanak Dev. Perhaps we could revive Whit to include everyone. It doesn't have to be Whit, it could be the first of May or the nearest Saturday/Sunday. It could be the autumn solstice and we could bring in the pagans. There are some people who hear the word 'Unitarian' and spit but there are far, far more who would welcome a chance to engage with other believers of whatever religion/denomination/sect. Try it. And then let us know how you get on.

Letters to the Editor

Lascaux article led to other studies

To the Editor:

Re Iain Brown's article 'Is Lauscaux about shamanic visions' (*Inquirer*, 21 October)

I am not a psychologist and usually describe myself as someone who likes to keep her feet on the ground. Nevertheless I found the article very interesting. I have read that drawings are also to be seen in caves in northern Australia.

However my studies have led me in a different direction. I have read the books by Dr Barbara Thiering, a New South Wales theologian. These are *Jesus the Man*, *Jesus of the Apocalypse* (the Life of Jesus after the Crucifixion) and *The Book that Jesus Wrote*. Dr Thiering studied the Dead Sea Scrolls, interpreted the code and applied it to the four gospels, the Book of Acts and

Revelation.

The latter book turned out to be the history of the church that Jesus set up after his crucifixion. Jesus did not die on the cross. He was seen actually by Paul and Paul remained three years in Asia before setting up churches for the diaspora Jews. Her second book, *Jesus of the Apocalypse* also explains among many other things that the Angels Michael, Gabriel, Sariel and Phanuel were titles within the hierarchy of the church with Archangel Michael at the top.

Katherine Huq

St Mark's, Edinburgh

How about hymnbooks for piano learners?

To the Editor:

I am practising the keyboard daily and am continually inspired and comforted by the wonderful hymns in both green

and purple books. My very great thanks to those writers. There are so many, but I select as my favourite number 210 in purple books for the words of David Doel and the stirring tune that brings with it nostalgic memories of 'What a friend I have in Jesus' from my days as an Anglican.

As a would-be pianist, not terribly gifted but improving daily, I wonder if the Unitarian Music Society might consider making a hymn book on the lines of 'Graded Pieces for Piano', or 'Joy of Christmas' or folk songs, etc. I can already play some of these after a few months of practice. I mistreat our purple and green books by tipp-exing, or crossing out some notes which I can't manage. Some books show the fingering, which is a great help. What do people think?

Brenda Knopf

Southampton

Hey Doris! Plenty is happening at Bury

By Anne Mills

Dear Doris (The *Inquirer* columnist who regularly asks to hear about what's happening in Unitarian churches),

Apologies! We at Bury Unitarian Church have been so busy with church activities that there hasn't been time to put pen to paper, so to speak! We've heard a superb concert from The Mancunian Singers, recently, and enjoyed a trip down memory lane when our Camera Club, Women's League and Men's Fellowship staged a joint venture, titled 'Bury: Past and Present', which raised well over £300 for Prostate Cancer UK – this year's Women's League national project. It was a light-hearted, nostalgic event, full of films, photographs and reminiscences, and a pie-and-peas supper completed the evening's entertainment.

We hold a service, every week, at which members of our Junior Church are also present; the highlight of their section of the service, before they light their own chalice from the main flame, is their story (on which the adults eavesdrop!) and these are wonderfully varied; in September, Anne Mills told a story she had written, about Cathy, who loved to dance – part of her service on 'Kindness'. This is now included in the youth department's online collection. (See: <http://bit.ly/2iGQDVh>) The church choir lead worship and contribute introits and anthems, on special occasions. Speaking of which, on 29 October, two of our newer members held a service to celebrate the renewal of their marriage vows. They have been married for nearly 10 years, but Bryan suffers from Alzheimer's disease and Barbara wished to hold this ceremony whilst he was still aware of what was happening – a bittersweet occasion, indeed!

In addition to the groups mentioned above, we also have a Book Club and a Lunch Circle, both of which meet monthly; a list of the current book, and all the past ones, appears on our

website. Lunches are usually provided onsite, by members – a bargain at £3 a head! In November, however, we will be eating out, locally, as the date conflicts with one of our Music Exams' days. We host these three times a year. We let our premises to four regular groups, as well as for separate events; concerts by local piano-teachers, to display their pupils' talents, are popular, as both our grand piano and the acoustics in our worship-area are excellent.

Bury is a Fair Trade Church, and the stall is open on alternate weeks. This has operated for the past 12 years and averages annual sales of more than £2,000. The premises are open to the public, for coffee and cakes, each Saturday morning. A thriving Worship Support Group is able to supply service leaders, if our minister, the Rev Kate McKenna is away, which encourages us to appreciate the inspiration and talents of our members. Should we find ourselves at a loose end, there is no need to fret, as there are always plenty of meetings to attend – necessary to ensure the smooth running of the church, in all directions.

During the next month or so, we have arranged for a concert to be given by the Corps and Drums of the Royal Lancashire Fusiliers; the GA President, the Rev Charles Van Den Broeder, is due to visit us, to conduct our service; our minister will attend the induction of the new rector of Bury, at Bury Parish Church – an invitation which we feel to be of great significance. And a group of 20 members will travel to The Nightingale Centre, at Great Hucklow, to partake of one of their Christmas Lunches.

With Christmas to prepare for, it looks as if we shall continue to be busy for the rest of the year! As for 2018 – watch this space!

Anne Mills is Chairperson of the congregation at Bury Unitarian Church, Lancashire.

Going forward with altered states

By Philip Colfox

Iain Brown's final comment (*Inquirer*, 21 October) 'Do we experience, as we worship together, mildly altered states of consciousness?' is, I think, central to the identity project currently being promoted by the Unitarian General Assembly's Executive Committee under 'Next Steps'.

Iain, a psychologist, quoted articles from the 'Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion' which proposed that altered states of consciousness are the root of all religion. He developed his thesis that Unitarians still worship together in a state of altered consciousness but they do so in a rational way.

Personally I have a slightly different formulation which is that Unitarians are just about able rationally to suspend their disbelief and follow a religious practice in order to receive a benefit just so long as it works for them.

Thus Unitarians can be mythology-blind and follow a practice in order to make themselves feel good. For instance they can meditate or pray or use other methods of altering their state of consciousness, (such as singing, smelling incense, even dancing or listening to drums, attend fire ceremonies, etc. as well as medical hypnosis) regardless of the surrounding mythology – be it Buddhist, Christian, or Shamanistic etc. Some who really do understand the point even say that the more unintelligible the mumbo-jumbo the better.

Unitarians believe in what works for them

This is far from the current concern that Unitarians don't believe in anything. They do – they believe in what works for them as individuals but acknowledge that it does not necessarily need to work for everyone and must never be imposed.

Another important point is to consider that not everyone is looking for group worship. Some – perhaps many more – people are looking for ways of living their lives and how to deal with life's challenges. For instance they are struggling with life's great uncertainties, with fear, anxiety, stress, success, failure, death, grief, poverty, riches, happiness, unhappiness, etc. Many people need to be told all the answers. Others need to work them out for themselves and typically those people are Unitarians or would be if they knew we existed.

So if someone asked me what is a Unitarian I would not say – as our identity project currently says – 'It is someone who believes in love and justice'. I would say more. I would say it is someone who does believe in love and justice but likes to work out the answers to life's big questions themselves. They are someone not willing to take someone else's word for it; someone who is mythology-blind about how she puts her religious practices into effect.

Beyond passionless practicality

Furthermore, Iain's point about altered states of consciousness is exceedingly important on another level in defining our Unitarian identity. There are many ministers currently who are most concerned to emphasise our theological basis and heritage, reminding us of our Christian roots. There is perhaps a hunger and yearning for more than just atheistic, rationalistic, humanistic – but possibly passionless – practicality. There seems to be a yearning for emotion and passion and faith in something. This seems to come even from people who have at one point been atheists themselves.

This is, I think, where the altered state of consciousness comes in. I believe that all religions work via the autonomic

nervous system. This is the part of the nervous system that does not involve active thinking. It is the unconscious nervous system. An example is that once one has danced a dance step enough times one has learned it and no longer has to think about it. Conversely, once one starts thinking about it again, it very soon goes wrong. There is a mechanism controlling that action which is not rational – it is subconscious and non-rational.

Many religious practices are designed to get one into the altered state of consciousness when the leader of the worship ceremony can use a shortcut to get into your subconscious and start teaching you new tricks – or brainwash you! Thus words said during an altered state of consciousness can be used to change your autonomic attitude to something.

Controlling our own brainwashing

This is the same mechanism as hypnosis and it goes to the root of our Unitarianism. We reject those who seek to make it compulsory to be brainwashed in a certain way by listening to certain prayers while in that state which tell us that we are 'miserable sinners' etc. We want to be in control of what the brainwashing is, and our brainwashing is probably to tell us that we are all emanations of God and inherently good, with bits of God in us – a much more empowering form of brainwashing which works even if we are atheists.

Unitarians are struggling and developing an internal argument between those who want more rationalism and those who want more passion and I think they want *more* brainwashing and I think they are right. I am a rationalist but I firmly believe that it is the failure to provide enough brainwashing, enough altered states of consciousness and what happens during that state – i.e. brainwashing or worship – that is leading to the low levels of excitement and low levels of success.

People want benefits from what they do, and there is huge competition now for our attention and time. The benefit that people want from their theology and their worship is, I think, to feel better.

This is what we ought to be about

This we can provide. But we have to realise how we do it. We do it by altering people's states of consciousness on a group basis (which is much cheaper than the one-to-one alternatives) and then helping them while in that state quickly and cheaply and very effectively to acquire the new emotional state that they wish to acquire via what I've called 'brainwashing'.

Now, we are Unitarians. People will not like my language. But I think that is what we ought to be about. If we do not shy away from this powerful mechanism and are not too frightened to exploit it fully for our own benefit (while of course understanding and voicing its dangers and limitations) then the future for Unitarians in the UK could be very exciting. This powerful tool which we have nearly forgotten, used rationally, and democratically and fairly, could very quickly make the whole world a very much better place.

It is all very well using these tools to re-tune one person emotionally. But when it is done to whole groups of people the effect can be enormous. That is the scope and challenge of what is before us.

Philip Colfox, a Bridport Unitarian, is a member of the Unitarian General Assembly's Executive Committee.

Women's League visits Gaskell house

The Women's League annual conference took place at Luther King House in October, combined with a very interesting visit to Elizabeth Gaskell House. Twenty-three ladies and three men were in attendance, including members as far north as Aberdeen and as far south as Bristol. President Rev Celia Cartwright conducted the plenary sessions where members discussed routine League business as well as the future of the League and changes to the format of the AGM, which takes place during the General Assembly. Specific concern was mentioned of the lack of new members and the need to make the League attractive to a younger generation.

The visit to Elizabeth Gaskell House provided an interesting afternoon outing, where a very knowledgeable guide presented the history of the building and of the Gaskell family.

It was good to hear the guide make reference several times



Some Women's League attenders (above). Photo left: League Secretary Susan Wildman and President Rev Celia Cartwright. Photos provided by Barbara Clifford.

to the Unitarianism of both Elizabeth and her husband, the Rev William Gaskell – very possibly the enhanced frequency was due to knowing that her audience comprised Unitarians from around the country. Even though the Rev Gaskell was minister at Cross Street Chapel for over 50 years, the Gaskells had to pay the rent for the house, which was eventually purchased by descendants before being sold on to another family. While the house has been restored as closely as possible to the Gaskell's time as residents, most of the furniture is general furniture of the period. The social activism of both Elizabeth and her husband was mentioned – Elizabeth's writings were based on real experience of the life and hardships of ordinary people.

The second evening social was organised by Janet Poole, immediate past President. She had a beetle-drive with a difference, a Hallowe'en theme and complicated rules that had to be learnt and played quickly. It really brought out the competitive streak in some.

– Barbara Clifford

Unitarian Women's Group tells stories

Now where can you see Shana's aunty, shoulder to shoulder with Michelle Obama? At the Unitarian Women's Group (UWG) Conference, of course. Nightingale Unitarian Conference Centre, end of October. Where else? We had taken photos of women whom we admired and international super stars, unknown heroines and mums and aunties looked out on us as we told their stories.

Then we displayed pictures of ourselves when younger and looked back on our stories then. And we looked at the story of the UWG and cast our eyes forward to see the story we might become.

We heard the story of an almost forgotten but very influential Unitarian woman: Anna Laetitia Barbauld – 'so long as letters shall be cultivated in Britain, or wherever the English language shall be known, so long will the name of this lady be respected.' Sadly not the case, but someone we were delighted to learn about.

It would not be the UWG conference if we did not have silly moments so we took a light-hearted look at those talented and better known story tellers, the Brontë sisters through the eyes of Maggie Fox and Sue Ryding – Withering Looks. And we held a talent show to prove we also were not without talent. It



Members of the Unitarian Women's Group gathered at the Unitarian Nightingale Conference Centre at Great Hucklow.

is not, of course, necessary to be able to sing, dance, recite or act to attend the Unitarian Women's Group Conference but you really must be able to laugh. We like a serious discussion too when we can get it so look out for the 2018 conference on the subject of Women's Issues.

– Dorothy Haughton